Guidelines and Requirements for NEJS Dissertation Proposals

The Pre-Proposal Stage

Students should begin to think about possible dissertation topics early on in their doctoral career. Keep a file of topics on which you imagine yourself writing. Over the years of course work and doctoral exams, you should be able to develop a good list of possible topics. Collect bibliography on the topics. Read primary texts and scholarship related to topics that interest you.

- Write papers for courses on topics that you think might be turned into or might relate to a possible dissertation topic.
- Read dissertations written by students in your field at Brandeis and at other universities. Develop a sense for what constitutes a good dissertation. Note the type of topics treated (the history of literature, presentation of methodology, chapters presenting evidence, conclusions, etc.) and how writers have come to delimit their scope of inquiry.
- Ultimately, you will want a topic that can be completed in a reasonably short period of time (generally within two years).
- Work with your doctoral examiners to include (to the extent possible) texts and topics pertinent to your expected dissertation on your doctoral exams. This can help you determine if a topic is viable, reduce the time you spend on research, and speed the proposal writing process.
- As you get closer to presenting the proposal, begin to speak with your advisor(s) about possible dissertation topics. Ask them for their estimate of the viability of the topics you think that you might want to write on, and also see if they have any suggestions for a topic.
- As you choose a topic, take note of your potential advisors' areas of specialty and competence. Faculty members may choose not to direct dissertations on topics distant from their fields of expertise.
- When you prepare for your dissertation and as you write it, keep in mind that you will probably want to publish the work as a book. Talk to faculty members about how they turned their dissertations into books. Look at books in your field to see how scholars have done the same with their dissertations. Having this longer goal in mind may affect how you formulate your topic and write the dissertation.

The Dissertation Proposal

Construct the proposal, both in length and structure, so that it may be used as the basis of a grant proposal in the future. This way the dissertation proposal fulfills two important functions at once.

**Length and style:** Although the *University Bulletin* permits “up to twenty pages,” try to keep the proposal to 4-5 pages (excluding the bibliography). Most grant proposals stipulate this limit. Moreover, busy faculty members are more inclined to read a shorter proposal more carefully. Treat the proposal as a formal academic paper; avoid colloquial language, use proper footnote and bibliographic form.

**Structure:** Structure the proposal to fit the following categories and insert them as subheadings in the text:
I. Title: Give the working title of the project, your name, the department and university, and the date.

II. Project summary: In a concise paragraph, provide a synopsis of the entire proposal (the sections that follow). This summary should give the reader a clear idea about the project, especially those who merely tend to eyeball the proposal.

III. Problematica: Pose explicitly the problems and questions that you seek to answer. You might begin with a paragraph of background on the general subject, then move to the main objectives and questions that you seek to resolve.

IV. History of previous scholarship in this field: Provide a critical analysis of the existing literature on the subject. If the topic has not been treated, what assumptions exist in the general literature? If the specialized literature does exist, why is it unsatisfactory? (Bear in mind that authors of this ‘inadequate literature’ or their colleagues may take offense. Be tactful!) This is not a paragraph of bibliography but an indication of the main characteristics of the existing scholarship. Cite a few major works as examples and put the rest in footnotes.

V. Methodology and source base: What approaches, conceptual tools and methods do you plan to employ? These obviously must correspond to the problematica that you seek to address (i.e. new gender analysis, post-modern literary approach, etc.) What new sources do you plan to use? How will you use them differently from the way they have been used in the past?

VI. Significance of the topic: What will your dissertation contribute methodologically, conceptually, empirically?

VII. Tentative chapter headings: Indicate how you plan to structure the dissertation. This will serve to concretize the proposal and to demonstrate that you are well on the way toward completing the research. Don’t be too ambitious; try to be realistic about how you will complete this project (6-8 chapters are the norm).

VIII. Bibliography: Include works that you have already read (3-5 pp.) Write for a general educated reader rather than for specialists, especially if the dissertation prospectus will double as a grant proposal.

Departmental Procedures in NEJS

All dissertation proposals must first be presented to a committee of three faculty members approved by the Chair of NEJS or the Graduate Advisor, which usually later comprises the group of three dissertation readers. The committee meets formally as a group with the student to discuss the project and possibly suggest revisions.

The proposal must then be presented to the departmental graduate advisor who might recommend further changes before it is brought before the entire faculty.

The proposal is then submitted to the entire NEJS faculty for consideration (at a department meeting), to assure that the proposed project is within general departmental standards. A brief (1-2 page) summary must be submitted (via the administrator) for electronic distribution two weeks before the department meeting, and the full proposal must be delivered to the department office (Lown 211) no later than one week before the meeting date.

At the department meeting, the student orally describes the work he or she is planning to pursue to the NEJS faculty (5 minutes maximum). Faculty members ask a
few questions about the project. The student then steps outside the room while the faculty confers. When the student is called back into the meeting, faculty members may provide (interdisciplinary) advice, bibliographical suggestions, or question aspects of the research plan.

Sample Proposals

A compilation of past NEJS dissertation proposals may be accessed in the department office (Lown 211) with the assistance of the department administrator. All approved proposals become part of the files that are available to other students.